

Fourth Edition.

Revised.

THE I. L. P.

ALL ABOUT IT.

By J. Keir Hardie, M.P.



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The I.L.P.—All About it.

WHAT is the I.L.P.? How did it originate? Who may become members? What does it do? How is it financed? These and similar questions are continually being asked by people interested in Labour politics and in Socialism, and the object of this article is to give plain answers thereto.

The Independent Labour Party is a National Organisation, with its Headquarters in London, and having nearly one thousand Branches scattered over England, Scotland, Wales, and parts of Ireland. The Publication Department issues the *Labour Leader*, the national weekly organ of the Party; the *Socialist Review*, monthly; the *Socialist Library*, a series of volumes dealing with the theory and practical problems of Socialism, by eminent Socialist thinkers at home and abroad, and in addition is constantly adding new pamphlets, books, and leaflets to its large and varied list.

Branches range in membership from twenty or twenty-five in small country villages to two thousand five hundred in the bigger centres of population. Branches engage in a never-ceasing propaganda. In addition to the business meetings, each branch arranges for one, two, or three public meetings each week, at which addresses are given on Socialism or on some phase of the Labour question, and at which papers and pamphlets are sold, and leaflets distributed and a collection taken. The enlightening effect of all this activity is very great. All the work is done voluntarily by devoted men and women full of the zeal of a great and inspiring cause, whose only reward is the consciousness that they are doing good. The attendance at the public meetings necessarily varies. In the summer time these meetings are mostly held out of doors, and on special occasions, when a speaker of national repute is advertised, it is no uncommon thing for an audience of five or even ten thousand persons to get together. In the winter time the meetings are held in halls, and several times in the course of the year the largest halls in our large cities are crowded to overflowing with audiences, every member of whom has paid for admission. Balancing the large meetings with the small, and the summer with the winter propaganda, a very conservative estimate is that two hundred and fifty persons attend each of the thousand meetings which are held weekly under the auspices of the Party, and thus we get the striking fact that

*Two hundred and fifty thousand people are reached every week
by I.L.P. Speakers.*

As those who attend such meetings are usually the more active and intelligent members of the community, the educational effect upon the political thought of the nation can

scarcely be over-estimated. Many of the branches have clubs or institutes, and it is a gratifying fact that only an insignificant proportion of these I.L.P. clubs have licences for the sale of intoxicating liquors. This of itself is a guide to the character and type of the men and women whom the Party attracts into its ranks.

Of the forty members of the Labour Party in the House of Commons, twenty-two are members of the I.L.P., and the Party has also hundreds of its members doing useful and effective work on the various bodies of the nation. What with its propaganda work, its printing press, its Members of Parliament, and of Town, County, Rural and Parish Councils, and the zeal and enthusiasm which characterises all its work, it is safe to say that these make up a record of activity which is without parallel in the political history of our country.

WHERE THE MONEY COMES FROM.

In the early days of the movement our opponents had but one explanation of our activity. From a thousand platforms and from scores of newspapers, the charge went forth week after week that the I.L.P. was financed by Tory gold in order to damage the Liberal Party. In most cases this statement was made by persons who knew it to be untrue in order to bias the minds of the people against the movement. In some cases, however, I can quite conceive that the belief was honestly held. Men who were used to the ordinary hum-drum work of party politics, and who knew how impossible it was to have even the smallest service done for their party without pay, looking round at the marvellous activity which they saw on every hand, and assuming that all this was being paid for, and knowing the difficulty of getting the working class to raise money for political purposes, may well have come to the conclusion that there was some subterranean flow of gold into the I.L.P. coffers. How else, they asked, could all the travelling and speaking, and distribution of literature, and expenditure upon elections be kept up? They know nothing of the inspiring effect which a great cause has upon the common people. Our members saw behind the I.L.P. a great principle which meant freedom for them and their class. Looking back now on those early days I myself am inclined to wonder how the money to carry on the work came in as it did. True, we had no salaried officials, we had no hotel bills, we had no fees for lectures, and we were all Comrades together in a common cause. But even then the marvel remains that a party composed almost exclusively, as was the case then, of working men and women, and springing up apparently out of the soil, should have been able in a matter of four or five years not only to stir up the dry bones of politics, but to centre the attention of the entire nation upon itself and its doings, and, as was freely admitted at the time, to bring disaster and rout at the polls upon the

once great historic Liberal Party. Every lie has its day, and as time went on the Tory gold one began to die out, and is now probably doing service in connection with some other movement.

Every member of the Party contributes a small sum, varying from one penny to twopence per week as branch dues. In addition to this there are collections at the meetings, and several times a year special funds are raised for Election and Special Propaganda purposes. We have never, despite repeated efforts, been able to get a complete balance sheet compiled showing the total income of all branches, but it is a safe and cautious estimate which assumes that the total annual income from all sources is somewhere about £100,000. From the branch dues a per-capita tax of 1/- per member per annum is paid to the Head Office, out of which office expenses and the cost of the official work of the party is met. The remainder of the income of the branch is spent on propaganda work, hiring halls, paying train fares, printing and posting, etc., etc. So much for the machinery of the Party.

THE INSPIRATION.

What is the great inspiration that leads men and women of scanty means to make such sacrifices of time and money? Hitherto only great religious movements have been able to quicken a response from the masses in this way, and having said this, we get to the core of the secret of I.L.P. success. The I.L.P. is a Socialist Organisation, and, for most of us, Socialism is a religion. To some, Socialism comes in the form of an intellectual conviction, to others it can be stated in the terms of a proposition in political economy; to a very large proportion of the members of the I.L.P. Socialism comes with all the emotional power of a great religious truth.

Few of the casual passers-by who halt for a few minutes to listen to a Socialist speaker standing on an upturned soap box under a lamp post at the corner of a noisy street, are likely to carry away a religious impression. The speaker seems more at home in vigorously denouncing the iniquities of an unjust system, and in exposing the hollowness of orthodox party politics, than in building up the vision of a nobler life. In this, however, he is but following the precedent set by the prophets of the Old Testament, and, by the way, of some of those of the New Testament. But get to know the man and his work; how he leaves his home night after night, undergoing fatigue and inconvenience after a day's laborious toil, how he spends Sunday in visiting some neighbouring town for propaganda purposes, or is hard at work all day in his own town aiding in the arrangement for the two Sunday meetings, and how he continues to do this year in and year out without any hope of fee or reward, and then the truth begins to dawn upon you that the

man is at bottom a religious enthusiast lured on by his vision of a Kingdom of God upon Earth. Nothing else explains the enthusiasm of the Independent Labour Party.

SOCIALISM.

Membership in the party is open, on absolutely equal terms, to men and women of all ranks and conditions of life who accept Socialism, and who are prepared to cut themselves adrift from orthodox political parties, and devote themselves whole-heartedly to the work of creating a Socialist Party. No others need apply. It is sometimes charged against the I.L.P. that it has never formulated its theory of Socialism. That is true, and therein lies its strength. The most shell-backed Marxist will be found working side by side in its ranks with the most visionary of Socialists.

For a time in this country, as in every other, there was an attempt to reduce Socialism to a dogmatic formula, and to brand everyone as heretic who refused to pronounce its shibboleth. This, however, was putting a formula in the room of a principle, and left no room for growth or expansion. It is the creeds of Christendom that have sapped Christianity of its living vital force.

To dogmatise about the terms of Socialism is as futile a proceeding as to dogmatise about the terms of religion. For what does Socialism mean? It means on its economic side that land and industrial capital shall be held as common property to be administered by the community in the interests of the whole of its members; and that industry shall be organised on the basis of Production for Use instead of the present day method of production for Profit. Were land and capital so owned and used, then Rent and Interest to individuals would disappear, since the whole of the wealth produced under a Socialist system of production would be the property of the community. That, however, is not an end, but only a means to an end. It is but the next stage in the evolution of a juster social order.

The poverty of the poorer, the business of the middle, and the wealth of the upper classes, are but different forms of bondage. Socialism has its message of freedom for all three. To the poor it offers release from the bondage of thankless toil and harassing poverty; to the middle class it promises freedom from the tyranny of the market, and to the rich it holds out the hope of joy in life in exchange for the burden of property. Had we the gift of omniscience so as to be able to see what a noble thing life could be, and what a mean, narrow, stunted thing we have made of it by our mad selfish struggle each to get the better of his neighbour, we should in very shame call upon the rocks to cover us that we might escape the laughter of the gods. Socialism means each for all, not each for self.

It represents the triumph of moral law over brute force. Under Socialism the winning of our daily bread, which is often the object of all our exertions, would become a mere incident, and the time, the talent, the energy now devoted to an unsuccessful effort to get the wherewithal to live, would be set free for conflict with the powers of darkness in the higher spheres of mind and spirit. Art, science, literature, would flourish under Socialism as they have never done in any age of the world's history. Freed from the haunting fear of want, mankind would rise to heights which hitherto have only existed in the rapt vision of the seer or the poet, and it is for the realisation of this ideal that the I.L.P. is toiling so strenuously.

SOCIALISM AND RELIGION.

Socialism takes no note of a man's religious opinions. Whether he be Roman Catholic, Anglican, Nonconformist, Mahomedan, Buddhist, or Pagan, is his own concern, and one with which Socialism does not interfere. It is universally acknowledged that Liberalism and Conservatism are things quite apart from, and entirely independent of, a man's religious opinions. So, too, with Socialism. It seeks to deal with those matters of human interest which can be seen, felt, and handled, and does not directly or indirectly interpose itself in any way between a man and the form of religious belief which he feels to be best for him.

Neither does Socialism propose, to take away anyone's private possessions. Not only a man's tooth pick, but also his personal attire, his household goods and effects, and where he so desired it, his house, would all under Socialism still remain his personal private property. So too with his books, his pictures, and his money. He would be just as free to hoard his savings then as he is now, and just as free to spend them in any way his taste might dictate. One thing alone he would not be able to do under Socialism; he would not be able to buy a tract of land, and say to all the rest of the earth, "No matter what your needs or necessities, this is mine, and you shall not be allowed to use it, save with my permission and on condition that you pay me tribute." Neither would he be able to use capital for the enslavement of the worker, nor to live in idleness all the rest of his life upon interest extorted from the forced labour of others. With land and capital transferred from individual to communal ownership, industry would be organised for the purpose of supplying the means for a healthy and fully developed life for the whole of the community.

Under Socialism, coal mining and coal selling, the raising of food, manufacture of clothing and furniture, and the building of houses and the like, would all be conducted on the same principle,—the supply of the necessities of life for the community.

If I have succeeded in making this clear, my reader will begin to understand why Socialists are so enthusiastic in propagating their belief. For, under Socialism there would be no slums; there could be no overwork, there would be no poverty. The community charged with the responsibility of supplying itself with the necessities of life would naturally be interested in seeing that it had the best of everything. Every big city spends money freely in obtaining a pure water supply. It does not leave the task to the private speculator, but itself undertakes it as a public duty, and the consequence is that it always seeks for the best. In like manner, when the supply of food, raiment and homes become a public duty, then the people responsible for the supply, who will also be the people for whom the food, raiment and houses are being supplied, will necessarily take care to have everything of the best.

PROPERTY AND POWER.

One point more. The possession of property means the possession of power. All down through the ages the men who have owned the land have always been the masters of the people. In recent years capital has come to take its place with land as an added power for the enslavement of the masses. It is not land or capital which enslaves the working class; it is their being privately owned which does this. No one can open his eyes and look round without realising that the men who own land and capital are the real masters of the nation. Practically the entire population is at their mercy. They wield this power because the possession of property is limited to the few. When, however, under Socialism Property, in this private sense has ceased to exist, and has become a common possession, power will also have passed from the hands of the privileged few into those of the entire community. Socialism, therefore, means economic freedom and complete political equality. Underlying Socialism is the great basic truth of human equality; not that all are to be alike, but that all are to be equal, which is a very different thing. Under Socialism there would be no exploiting class, no tyranny of one sex or race over another. Socialism would give reality to the claim so often insisted upon from the Christian pulpit, and yet so universally belied by our every day deeds, that God hath made of one blood all the nations of the earth to dwell together in unity.

ORIGIN OF THE I.L.P.

How did the I.L.P. originate? Who shall say? Why do the buds begin to unfold in Spring? The mysterious influences of nature have appointed times and seasons in which they begin to operate, and so, too, I am convinced there are spring tides connected with the affairs of man, governed by laws of which we know next to nothing.

Be this as it may, during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century the new Socialist spirit began to make itself felt in this country. At first it took the form of strikes and combinations amongst the hitherto unorganised and unskilled workers. A little later it began to manifest itself as a more or less definitely political movement. The Social Democratic Federation, the Fabian Society, and the Socialist League had all come into being, but were not meeting the needs of the situation. The League, owing to its anti-parliamentarism, and the Federation by its absence of political aptitude, had failed to obtain any hold upon the public mind, whilst the Fabians confined themselves to an educational propaganda. About the year 1890, political Labour Organisations began to spring into spontaneous being under various names all over the country. There is some dispute as to which of the big towns was the first to adopt the name Independent Labour Party, but, as the new movement developed, this came to be the title which was found to have most favour by the new organisations. Each succeeding year of this period saw the question of Socialism and Labour politics entering more and more into the debates and proceedings of the Trades Union Congress, and at the General Election of 1892, there were quite a number of I.L.P. candidates in the field.

At this time it has to be borne in mind there was still no National Organisation, but at the beginning of 1893 a Conference was held at Bradford at which a National Party was definitely formed. This Conference declared for Socialism as the ultimate aim of the Party, and political independence of the most *outré* kind as its political faith. I had been returned to Parliament for S.W. Ham, and the next three years was a period of most extraordinary activity and development.

EARLY ELECTIONEERING EPISODES.

In the constituencies not only was the new party fighting municipal contests, and getting beaten every time, but we were also in the field with a candidate at nearly every parliamentary bye-election. Those were the days of unlimited faith and glorious irresponsibility. Many an amusing volume could be written on the doings of the party at that time, particularly in connection with the running of parliamentary candidates.

Let me give one illustration. A vacancy occurred at Barnsley, and the National Council of the Party had a meeting to consider it. We had not one penny in the funds; in fact we were in debt. There was only one small struggling I.L.P. branch in the constituency, which was many miles in extent, and included about a score of towns and villages. I was deputed by the Council to visit Barnsley and consult with the local members about the vacancy. The meeting was held in a small, evil smelling loft over a stable, and there were present

fourteen members all told. The Election, we knew, would cost three or four hundred pounds, and I suggested that the first thing to be done was to find out what funds could be raised. Each member present was asked to guarantee a certain sum which he would raise by hook or crook before election day, and when these promises were all totalled up, we found we had sums promised amounting in all to £2 13s. 6d. A majority of the members were against fighting until one comrade, a Swiss, who had been in a good way of business, but was then earning his living as a working jeweller, drew off a massive solitaire diamond ring which he was wearing, and putting it on the table said,—“There, that will fetch £25 in any pawn shop, that is my contribution to the fight.” That settled the matter, and we straightway adopted Pete Curran as the candidate, and the next day the campaign was in full swing. Every parson in the constituency, every newspaper, every trade union official of any standing was against us. We were stoned by the miners, who formed the bulk of the electors, and hooted by women and children in the streets. We had to be our own chairman at meetings, and seldom found a supporter with sufficient courage to move the resolution of confidence in the candidate. But we went through with the contest, polling over 1,000 votes, and to-day the Barnsley division is almost solid for Socialism.

At the 1895 General Election, the I.L.P. entered the lists with 28 Candidates, all of whom, including myself, were defeated. This, however, did not daunt us, and we kept pegging away on the old lines until 1900 again brought a General Election. This it will be remembered, was fought in the very midst of the Boer War, and as the Party to a man had been Pro-Boer, it did not look as though our candidates would stand much chance at the polls. They went forward, however, into the fray, and I was again successful in winning a seat at Merthyr Tydfil, whilst each of our other candidates considerably increased his poll of five years before.

From that time the Party has never looked back. Before the 1900 Election we had entered into an alliance with the Trade Unionists, the result of which were fully seen at the 1905 Election when 29 Labour members, the greater proportion of whom were Socialists, were returned to Parliament. In the General Election of 1910 the 29 were increased to 40.

PAST AND PRESENT.

These glorious early days, with their enchanting irresponsibility, have now gone, but it is still the I.L.P. which gives the Labour movement and the Social Reform forces of the country a fighting Socialist lead. The political philosophy of the movement is summed up in a recognition of the fact that politicians never concede a reform because it is right, but only because it is dangerous to withhold

it longer. In other words, Parliament never moves forward of its own initiative, but only in response to pressure.

But the I.L.P. realises no less clearly that Socialism can never be imposed upon an unwilling or an unready people. The organisation of the masses, their training in politics, and their being made to feel a sense of responsibility for working out their own industrial, political and economic salvation, all are a necessary part in the evolution of the Socialist State. So long as the working class is dependent upon some power outside itself for reforms, it is accepting a badge of inferiority. If democracy has any meaning, it must mean that the mass of the people, in their own strength, shall evolve solutions for their own problems. Unless the working class can evolve leaders and statesmen from its own ranks, it is doomed to continue to occupy the menial position of being mere hireling hewers of wood and drawers of water for its masters and rulers. There is no room in the party for the superior person who wants to play the part of autocrat. I question whether there is another political party in the world where democracy is so much of a reality as it is within the ranks of the I.L.P.

POLITICAL METHODS.

The I.L.P. signifies a revolt against the assumption that working people are in any sense inferior, either mentally or morally, to any other section of the community. The Party stands for political equality, and that equality can only be shown by the working class taking its place with other sections of society, and exercising direct controlling power in the State in proportion to its numerical strength. The term "working class" is not used in any restricted sense, but includes all who by head or hand are rendering useful service to the community. These, whatever their occupation or profession, have a common interest in getting rid of a system which enables a privileged few to hold them in a state of servitude. Every branch of the I.L.P. is a training ground, not only in political organisation, but also in the development of that spirit of mutual help and co-operation which is of the very essence of Socialism.

To prevent misunderstanding, however, let me add that the I.L.P., whilst holding aloft the high ideal of Socialism, realises that the end is not to be reached at one bound. The walls of the industrial system, with its great wealth and resources, will not fall at the blast of any trumpet. The reconstruction of society on a Socialist basis must proceed by the same methods of evolution which have called the existing order into being. Thus it comes that not only in the House of Commons, but also upon municipal institutions I.L.P. representatives are everywhere engaged in pressing immediate practical reforms upon the attention of the community.

The provision of meals for destitute school children, of work for the unemployed, and of pensions for the aged, are illustrations in support of this contention. It would be to mock the misery of the poor to ask them to wait for the realisation of Socialism before their needs were attended to. So, too, in such matters as land nationalisation. The I.L.P. is continually urging upon public authorities the desirability of acquiring land for small holdings, for town planning and other public purposes. On the wider issue, we support the taxation of land values, not as an end in itself, but as a means of throwing the land open for occupation, of reducing the cost of acquiring land, and also of raising money for much-needed social reforms. A legal eight hours' day, proper housing accommodation, the abolition of child labour, and similar measures have always found their most powerful advocates in our ranks.

Despite all this, those who wish to misrepresent our activities say that we are against immediate practical reform, and refuse to take what we can get meanwhile because we cannot get Socialism all at once. This, however, is only the usual political misrepresentation. Our whole record is a proof of its falsity.

THE LABOUR ALLIANCE.

No record of the work of the I.L.P. would be complete without some reference to its connection with the Labour Party. For a number of years prior to 1892 efforts had been made by myself and others to induce the Trade Union Congress to formulate a working class political policy. Something of the kind had been done in 1887, when the congress called into being the Labour Electoral Association, but five years' experience of the tactics of that body had shown conclusively that its leaders were too closely allied with the Liberals to allow of its ever being anything else than a mere adjunct of that party, and so at a private meeting of Socialist delegates who were representing their Unions at the Glasgow Trade Union Congress in 1892, it was decided to take steps to create a more militant organisation, which, whilst being definitely Socialist in its aims, would yet be sufficiently in touch with Trade Unionism, to give a strong lead to that movement in the direction of political independence. It thus happened that from the very outset the I.L.P. was in sympathetic touch with Trade Unionism, nearly all its leading propagandists being also Union Officials.

When, therefore, in 1899 a resolution was carried at the Trade Union Congress instructing its Executive to invite the Socialist and the Co-operative movements to meet the Trade Unions to consider how best to increase the number of Labour Members in Parliament, the I.L.P. had no hesitation about accepting an invitation so clearly in line with its own policy. The

conference was duly held and the Labour Party formed, with results which are now known to all the world. Nothing so revolutionary has ever been known in British Politics as this creation of a working-class party within whose folds 1,500,000 of the organised workers of the nation have already been gathered. Forty members of the present House of Commons (1910) have been returned under its auspices, and these form the nucleus of that party of the future which shall win economic freedom for the people.

Whilst working in close and cordial relationship with its Trade Union Allies, the Independent Labour Party retains complete freedom of action for the propagation of Socialism, both in Parliament and on the public platform. There is no denying the marvellous growth of Socialist thought and activity during the past decade, and, in my opinion, no cause has contributed so much to bring this about as our friendly relationships with the Trade Unionists, and I can conceive of no greater calamity to the Socialist movement than would surely follow from any breach of this understanding. By preserving harmony we give confidence to the rank and file, whereas by returning, as we inevitably should, were the alliance to be broken, to the old era of internal strife and discord, we should fill them with despair and drive tens of thousands of them back to their old party allegiance. Happily, there are no signs of any such calamity overtaking the movement, whilst on the other hand there is every sign to encourage the belief that the Labour Party has come to stay, and that in the not distant future Socialism will be frankly acknowledged to be the goal towards which it is working.

CONCLUSION.

As I have already indicated membership in the I.L.P. is not limited by either sex or nationality. The exploitation of the coloured races by the whites is just as obnoxious to the Socialist as is the exploitation of the poor by the rich. Ours is the one political movement where women stand on terms of perfect equality with men. Women are eligible for election to the National Council of the Party, and to the various offices on the same terms as men. From its earliest inception, the I.L.P. has taken a decided stand on the side of those who claim immediate political equality for women. In the sphere of industry also the same claim is put forth. Equal pay for equal work. If Socialism when realised is to mean freedom, it must be freedom for every one, and I am of those who have always held that in this connection women have more to gain from Socialism than men. Our Party, too, is international. Once every three years we meet in Congress with the representatives of the Socialist and Labour movement from the ends of the earth.

Those who have followed me intelligently thus far will now understand all there is to be known about the I.L.P. They will also realise why it is such a force and power in politics. It leaves nothing to chance, nor does it depend upon any power outside itself for having things done. It is a militant organisation from start to finish. It seeks no quarter from any party; it gives none. To some extent the ferocious opposition of press, pulpit and platform, which the party had to encounter in its earlier days has been modified. On the other hand, the forces of reaction are now organised and equipped as they never were before. There is now a special agency for the supply of Anti-Socialist literature and speakers. Just as the attitude of the general public has become more friendly towards Socialism, the owners of privilege and monopoly have become alarmed, and are organising to check our progress. Well supplied with money, powerfully backed by the least scrupulous section of the daily and weekly press, the Anti-Socialist Union may be reckoned upon to keep itself well in evidence. Hitherto the success attending its efforts has not been great, and I merely mention it here because of the testimony which its existence bears to the progress which our movement is making. The strength of the Party and its growing power in politics made some such frantic effort inevitable; but whether the I.L.P. is being flattered or cajoled or strenuously opposed, makes not one jot or tittle of difference. It goes on its way swerving neither to right nor left, but pressing steadily forward towards the realisation of its Socialist goal.

The task of educating the people is no light one. Generations of convention, of long hours, of irregular employment, of false teaching, of hovels and slums, and of industrial subjection had so inwoven themselves into the fibre of the being of the working class, that they had almost lost all knowledge of what was due to themselves. Even now the agencies to which they have been accustomed to look for light and guidance are still mostly ranged against them. But they are bestirring themselves. The pick and flower of the manhood and womanhood of the nation is found to-day inside the ranks of the I.L.P. Every great religion has had to make its appeal to the poor; so too with Socialism, but just as in the past, so also now, men and women from all ranks and classes of society, attracted by the beauty of the ideal which Socialism offers, are casting in their lot with the workers and strenuously striving to bring about the evolution of a happier day for humanity. Speed its coming.

For information on— Socialism & Social Problems

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